

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 484

FL 010 011

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TITLE Round the Globe with Young Pen-Friends and
Tape-Friends. IATEFL Newsletter, No. 54.
PUB DATE Aug 78
NOTE 5p.; Adaptation of paper presented at the
International Conference of the IATEFL (10th, London,
England, April 11-14, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communicative Competence (Languages); Cultural
Education; *Cultural Exchange; *English (Second
Language); *Intercultural Programs; Intergroup
Education; International Educational Exchange;
*International Programs; Language Instruction;
*Letters (Correspondence); Secondary Education;
Secondary School Students; *Second Language Learning;
Student Participation; Tape Recordings

ABSTRACT

A teacher of English in Sweden reports on experiences in organizing international school correspondence and tape exchange in English classes. Goals of the correspondence are the teaching of language, teaching of the culture of other countries, and promoting better international understanding. School correspondence can provide plenty of popular nonfiction learning material that is useful in practicing and improving communicative skills. To promote communicative skills, the technique of dialogue in tape-slide shows has been used; pictures can be described through questions and answers in a relay dialogue. Students can bring their letters to read aloud in class, with commentaries in English, if possible. It is suggested that presenting pupils with verbal and pictorial items such as recordings, magazines, and song texts from English-speaking countries can stimulate interest in international correspondence.
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IATEFL

NEWSLETTER

*The Bulletin of the International
Association of Teachers of English
as a Foreign Language*

No. 54 August 1978

Round the Globe with Young Pen-Friends and Tape-Friends

For more than 20 years I have organised international school correspondence and tape exchange in many of my English classes. I taught at intermediate level in our comprehensive school system and my students came from the suburb of Hägersten, on the Southern outskirts of Stockholm. In many ways I tried to convey to my pupils fresh ideas from abroad, and I found in school correspondence a different and new approach to creative learning, which met on the whole with a positive response from the learners. In the various meaningful projects I suggested from time to time at certain crucial points of the language course there was seldom more enthusiasm and success about than in letter writing and the taping of friendship messages. I think it is of great importance to find methods of getting not only some sort of enjoyable diversion but also clearly rewarding new routines at school.

During recent years we have received many letters asking for correspondence or a tape exchange, many because I was a member of the association WORLD TAPE PALS, later called WORLD TAPES FOR EDUCATION. The yearly fee was 5 dollars, and for that you were entitled to have your name, address, and a short note about your interests published in the roster list twice a year. There was also a bimonthly periodical, TAPE TOPIC, containing articles and news from members all over the world. Regrettably, WORLD TAPES FOR EDUCATION decided to discontinue this service a couple of years ago. They were sponsored for

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some time by the movement PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE, started by the late president Eisenhower to promote friendship among the nations of the world. We still have in several countries independent national branches of PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE, which co-operate with other organisations in the fields of student exchange and international correspondence. The current list of addresses available at the head office of this movement in Stockholm covers many parts of the world, containing 250 names from 40 countries. Most of these people are young, and want to correspond in English, which shows the importance of English for international communication.

As the years went by and I saw new generations arrive in my English classes, I found it necessary to extend our contacts with foreign schools in English-speaking regions of the world and to initiate individual letter-writing for new groups of penfriends to be. With some short breaks, we carried on our exchange of letters, postcards, newspapers, magazines, and collective tape-recordings as a regular feature in the English language course. One motivation was this: Let us present something we enjoy IN ENGLISH, and it will benefit language study. You can call this a situational method, since we were in situations in which we addressed somebody and received messages from somebody. That is language at work, language for communication.

Certainly the teaching of language is one essential aim of international school correspondence. Equally important are perhaps two other objectives, with no special preference for either of them: namely, teaching the culture of other countries and education for better international understanding.

I have found that school correspondence and exchange of tape letters give excellent opportunities for the teacher to arouse in children a lasting interest and keenness to continue independently and individually with their private correspondence as well as their language study. Within the curriculum there will be time — and that time is not wasted — for discussions on grammatical constructions, on vocabulary or syntax, on colloquial expressions, but also on foreign customs, literature, and civilisation, to which young students find references in their letters, magazines etc., and which need to be explained. Learning to know about foreign people is a first step towards friendship and mutual understanding across the borders, across the oceans. The English poet and clergyman John Donne, in the 17th century, said: "No man is an island." This sentence is still true, and even more so in today's shrinking world.

The information you give about yourself in a letter is always appreciated as a token of kind openness, and between school-children a frank openness and truthfulness is often expressed in their commentaries on the joys and sorrows of life. Where children are involved many surprising and also amusing pieces of information appear in school correspondence, not least to the delight of the teacher when told in confidence.

Still greater interest can be developed and shared in the English class if the teacher can get his pupils to work together in accordance with a particular plan to give and obtain from a correspondence partner as many aspects as possible of a subject chosen. The result can be an account expressed in a scrapbook or recorded in a tapeletter.

The most elucidating complement to illustrate what you wish to tell pen-friends and tape-friends are certainly the pictures you enclose with your letters. Interest in photographs is shown by this quotation from a letter by Joyce Jones of Wasco, California, to her Swedish pen-friend: 'Margareta, will you please send me a photo of yourself. I want to see what you look like. Mr Bartel, my teacher, got a photo of your class, but I couldn't tell which one was you.' And if then your tape recording is accompanied by drawings, slides, maps, tourist pamphlets, press clippings, and school magazines, these multi-media materials will make the correspondence more exciting. Such things as can be made by the pupils in a classroom project are definitely more valuable for exchange, and have a very positive appeal to pupils in friendship schools everywhere.

After some years we found we had quite a big collection in store of school projects of foreign origin. These could be utilised more than once. We appreciate being able to study time and again the tape-slide shows we keep about Pennsylvania and New Zealand, the scrapbooks and magazines from California, Florida and also New Zealand, the song recordings on tape from Scotland, Newfoundland and various American schools. We learned quite a lot about those far-off regions of the world, their ways of life, their cultural heritage. I hope we have given a satisfactory amount of information about Sweden in return. Facts of a simple kind, glimpses of young people at school and at leisure, some aspects of the local scenery, such things are easy to express in a way that maintains interest. As a rule, true stories are more in favour than fiction in the ordinary textbooks. And the school correspondence can provide plenty of popular non-fiction learning material, useful in practising and improving the communicative skills.

There is one more point to emphasise: young learners seem to like making friends in this way, through their newly-acquired ability to express themselves in a foreign language. They can be found mentioning proudly this in their letters: 'We are writing to you in an English lesson.' And also: 'We are practising our English in this tape recording.'

At the beginning young correspondents need some advice and a little instruction. There are some basic rules about letter writing to bear in mind. For our Swedish learners it is practical first to have a draft of a letter written, to be considered with the teacher. Perhaps you have to check the dating, the set phrases to start and finish with, the full address, but you can also discuss what sort of content would be most interesting, and what usage would be most correct. The teacher should be responsible up to a point for a good standard of both content and grammar in the very first letters, but one cannot be too petty, to judge from letters received from abroad and written by English children. Their quite obvious mistakes sometimes console us EFL-learners for the errors we make, and are of course an extra reminder to double our efforts. On acquiring individual pen-friends the children must feel that this is now their own personal affair, to be carried on independently. And I think that maintaining an exchange of letters faithfully and regularly helps to develop personal responsibility and orderliness.

Occasionally — to make the most of letters we have received — we can try to translate them into Swedish, just as an exercise, but usually there is no problem of understanding the full meaning. Here are some lines from

a New Zealand writer to one of our pupils: 'If in any letter you receive from me there is anything you don't quite understand, please ask about it, and I will gladly tell you.'

Sometimes we also ask our tape-friends questions, and hope for their answers in their next tape-message. Once a boy here wanted to know more about Scottish bagpipes and in the next tape we heard a girl playing a tune on the bagpipes and giving a commentary. To promote communicative skills we also used the technique of dialogue in some tape-slide shows. The pictures were described through questions and answers in a relay dialogue by several members of the English class. We thus made a broader approach to the practice of spoken English on the matter at issue.

We learners in Sweden cannot, as native English-speaking tape-friends often do, just sit down in front of a microphone and start improvising, just chatting along loosely. I think, as a rule, we do better to write a manuscript and have rehearsals. And that is quite natural, if you wish to act out a play to send in a tape-letter or read your lines in a dialogue. This is a fine way of getting practice, and the study of English is kept going almost unconsciously. The same could be said about singing in English. We generally make trial recordings before putting a song on the final tape-version, so that we can have more than one example of recording to choose from, when we mix some music into the message for a change.

The right moment to start correspondence with a new group is directly after presenting letters or tapes received. You can also ask pupils to bring their letters to read aloud in class, with commentaries in English if possible. After the arrival of new messages in a collective exchange with your friendship school, you should acknowledge receipt immediately. Then it is good to elect a pupils' committee to look after the response project. Time must be allowed for the committee to plan a new issue on a particular topic, whether it be Life at School, or Swedish Food, or Nature Study at the Seaside. These are some titles of projects we undertook. By presenting your pupils with the right sort of verbal and pictorial items — recordings, magazines, song-texts etc. — from the distant English-speaking countries represented in your collections I think you can stimulate their interest in this agreeable educational activity, international correspondence.

Certainly there are many other ways of making your students happy and the working hours successful, but in my opinion school correspondence should not be neglected as a teaching aid. It augments language study and increases understanding of other countries.

Arvid Magnhagen